

**Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources**  
**Wisconsin's Northern State Forest Assessments:**  
**Recreational Supply and Demand**  
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**Executive Summary**

Recreation is one of the primary uses of Wisconsin's northern state forests. Visitors from Wisconsin and many other states flock to the forests seeking a wide range of recreational opportunities. People use the forests for "quiet" activities such as hiking, fishing, bird watching and cross country skiing. Visitors also use the forests for hunting and for motorized activities like snowmobiling and power boating. Whether they are campers or day visitors, whether they hike or bike, state forest visitors want and expect certain things from the forests and from the people they share the forest with. Recreation assessments are useful in ascertaining forest users' needs, wants and demands, as well as recreation opportunities available in the state forests and surrounding regions, rates of recreation participation and recreation trends.

This report provides a general assessment of outdoor recreation and trends in northern Wisconsin and detailed recreation assessments of two northern state forests, the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest (NH/AL) and the Brule River State Forest (the Brule) and their surrounding regions. As part of the state forest master planning process, these assessments are useful in identifying recreation issues that are important to and that may have a direct impact on state forest planning. Additionally, these assessments explore recreational users' opinions and attitudes on many of these issues, and identify the existing recreational opportunities and infrastructure in and around the NH/AL and Brule River State Forests.

Specific issues explored in this report include:

- Recreation participation and trends
- Recreation opportunities in northern Wisconsin
- Inventories of important recreation facilities and opportunities in the NH/AL, Brule River State Forests and their surrounding areas
- Forest users and their issues
- Perspectives of ATV riders, snowmobilers, cross country skiers and campers

**THE STUDY**

The three assessments in this report were developed by integrating information from numerous studies and data sources. Many of the studies were undertaken specifically for

the state forest master planning effort. Others are recent studies related to recreation in Wisconsin. Most of the studies reflect four primary research methods: surveys, focus groups, trend analyses and inventories. Several studies incorporate general recreation information with results specific to ATV riders, campers, cross country skiers, snowmobilers, hikers and bikers. Some of the studies focus on information specific to the NH/AL and the Brule while others focus on the northern forests in general. A complete list of all of the studies included in this report may be found in the “References” section at the back of this report.

## **TRENDS AND ISSUES HIGHLIGHTS**

### **Outdoor Recreation in Northern Wisconsin**

Surveys show that the most popular outdoor recreation activities of Wisconsin residents are swimming, wildlife viewing and picnicking, followed by biking, fishing and nature study/bird watching. The fewest number of people ride horseback, jet-ski or sail.

Demographers forecast increases in the number of participants in nearly all types of outdoor activities. Over the next 10 years an aging Wisconsin population is expected to increase demand for activities popular with older adults. These activities are the more passive and environmentally appreciative forms of recreation, such as watching birds and wildlife, nature study and nature photography. Presently, these activities combined represent the largest number of participants in Wisconsin outdoor recreational activities and are likely to increase their dominance in the future. Several more active sports, which are commonly thought of as the domain for younger participants, show the greatest estimated percent increase in participation. These are jet-skiing (24 percent), canoeing (19 percent), cross-country skiing (15 percent) and ATV riding (14 percent). Given the projected overall swelling of the ranks of non-motorized recreation and the rapidly accelerating numbers of people enjoying the various kinds of motorized recreation on both land and water, it is likely that the already significant conflicts between these groups will increase.

In the final analysis, the many types of state forest recreators differ greatly but have one important thing in common. They share a love for getting out and experiencing nature in some way—for enjoying, in particular, the beauty of the outdoors.

### **Recreation Providers**

The major public outdoor recreational opportunities in the northern region are found on abundant public land, but certain private forest lands and commercial tourist facilities play a significant role as well. State lands comprise 11 percent of the public recreational lands in northern Wisconsin, with federal, county and private industrial forests making up the remaining 34 percent, 33 percent and 22 percent, respectively. Each provider fills a

somewhat different niche. For example, private commercial campgrounds provide nearly all the fully developed, RV type camping. Most of the rustic and primitive style camping is found on national and state forests. While private industrial forest lands are not open to camping, they offer abundant opportunities for hunting, fishing and some other non-motorized uses. County forests are popular hunting areas and, together with the national forests, provide a high percentage of the region's motorized recreational opportunities.

Studies indicate that state forests in particular play a primary role in providing a recreational base for silent-sport activities. In northern Wisconsin participants in silent-sport activities are two and one half times as likely as either motorized recreators or hunters to seek out state lands for their activities. Most hunters use non-industrial private forests while motorized recreators primarily use private and federal land.

Opportunities for solitude will likely become increasingly rare and correspondingly prized in northern Wisconsin with the growth of the number of people participating in outdoor recreation and the surge in popularity of motorized recreation. Maintaining areas that provide quiet, solitary outdoor recreation will become highly important to many recreators.

### **Top Regional Recreation Issues**

The primary issues on recreators' minds are motor/non-motor conflicts, crowding issues, personal safety, the appropriate type of campground amenities (like showers and flush toilets) for state forests campgrounds and timber harvesting (its impacts on recreation).

#### **Silent-sports versus Motorized Sports**

Over the next decade the most dominant recreation management issues will most likely revolve around the tug-of-war between motorized and non-motorized recreation interests. Recreational motorized vehicles include snowmobiles, ATVs, motor boats and jet skis. Many silent-sport recreators, including hikers, bikers, bird watchers and skiers, are opposed to motorized recreation, particularly that which conflicts with their activities. ATV use is especially contentious. ATV riding is currently among the fastest growing sports in Wisconsin. Many ATV riders feel there is a distinct lack of ATV trails and are looking primarily to public lands for places to expand their riding opportunities.

The difficult problem facing recreation managers and planners in this time of increasing recreational use and conflict is how to appropriately provide opportunities for all without one style of recreation dominating, displacing or overly impacting the experiences of others. Increasingly, recreational providers will need to work together—each providing that part of the recreational pie that they can best provide—in order to meet our wide and ever-increasing outdoor recreation demands in the north.

### Crowding

Numbers of outdoor recreators are expected to increase, heightening conflicts among participants in the same activity as well as among participants in different activities. The principal problems reported in a recent survey of state forest visitors were people problems: too many people making too much noise and leaving too much litter. Increasing levels of recreational intensity in the north will increase pressure on the northern state forests to both provide more recreational opportunities and maintain the expected quality of experience.

### Personal Safety

Personal safety is another concern that will increase with the number and variety of recreators using the same area. Swimmers are concerned with jet-skiers who ride close to swimming areas. Hikers report worrying about meeting mountain bikers on shared trails. Safety is also a concern for snowmobile and ATV riders due to speed and crowding on some trails.

### Camping and Campground Amenities

Campers have highly diverse preferences for camping styles and experiences. It is no surprise that they strongly disagree on which amenities are appropriate for state forest campgrounds. In general, there appear to be two types of campers: those who want flush toilets, showers and electricity, and those who do not. Some campers say amenities like showers and flush toilets are critical for them or their family. A substantial number of campers, however, see rustic and primitive style camping as the most fitting for state forests, and they feel that state forests are an important provider of these types of camping opportunities. Camping style preferences aside, nearly all campers agree that secluded campsites and privacy are valued more highly than any other campground attributes.

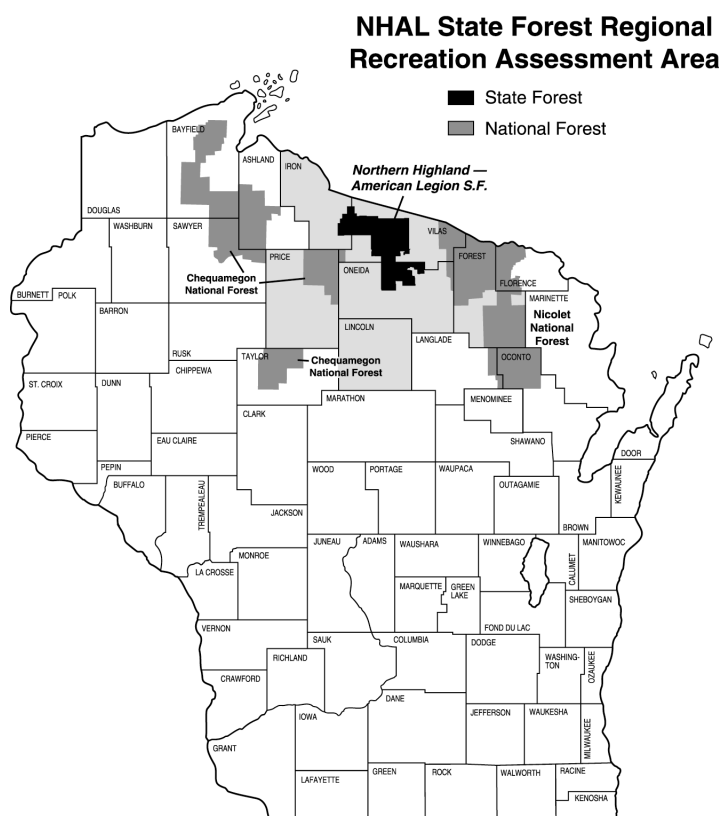
### Timber Harvesting

A high percentage of people are concerned about timber harvesting in areas where they recreate. Their greatest concern about timber harvesting is that it not disturb their recreational activities in any way. They are most opposed to large-scale visual changes (i.e. openings) in the forest landscape. Forest thinning and harvesting that creates small openings are more acceptable. Silent-sport enthusiasts (e.g. hikers, bird watchers) as a group are the most concerned about the visual impacts of harvesting, while hunters and motorized users are somewhat less concerned.

## NH/AL STATE FOREST ASSESSMENT HIGHLIGHTS

The lake-studded Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest is the state's largest property, drawing over two million visitors each year from Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa and other states. For some it is a personal vacation destination or a place to gather with family and friends. Many people visit the NH/AL year after year. For these people, the Forest is a part of their lives. They feel a deep, personal ownership toward their favorite campgrounds, lakes or trails. The NH/AL State Forest and its regional recreation area are shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.**



### Recreational Use Trends

Annual visitation on the NH/AL is now just over two million. Most outdoor recreational activities on the NH/AL have increased steadily during the 10-year period from 1989 to 1998. The strongest growth has occurred since about 1993. Hunting, boating and fishing, some of the most popular activities on the NH/AL, saw slow but steady increases over the

period. In 1998, forest staff recorded almost 200,000 hunters and almost 500,000 people boating/fishing. The number of hikers is smaller, but nearly tripled between 1993 and 1998, increasing from just over 10,000 to just under 30,000 hikers. Canoeing, too, has seen a dramatic increase, almost doubling in that time, with over 35,000 canoeists recorded in 1998. Camping increased fairly steadily over the period. Winter activities such as snowmobiling and cross country skiing fluctuate depending on snow conditions. The preceding use estimates are based on camper registration data and staff observations, and should not be viewed as precise.

Overall, there is no reason to believe that the recreation use trends seen in the '90s won't continue well into this decade. With the population growing older, strong growth in more passive or appreciative types of activities like hiking and nature study are likely to continue.

### **Recreational Opportunities on the NH/AL State Forest**

Outdoor recreation opportunities are diverse and abundant in the NH/AL State Forest. In particular, visitors are drawn to the Forest's water resources. The Forest is blessed with one of the highest concentrations of lakes in the world. Sport fishing is a major recreational use of these water resources. Other popular water oriented recreation includes swimming, water skiing, boating, jet-skiing, canoeing and sightseeing. The Forest has nine designated swimming beaches and more than 100 designated boat launch sites.

Camping is another popular activity in the NH/AL. The Forest offers 18 family campgrounds with approximately 900 campsites, plus two outdoor group camping areas that accommodate a total of 100 people. Most of the campgrounds are small. Two thirds have about 50 or fewer campsites and the two largest have roughly 100 sites. Just over one third of the Forest's campsites (349 sites in three campgrounds) are served by showers and flush toilets. Only one campground (39 campsites) offers electricity. The remaining campgrounds are rustic style with only the basic amenities such as hand-pumped water and pit toilets. Five campgrounds offer special facilities for disabled campers. In addition to campgrounds, 131 remote canoe and wilderness (backpack) campsites are scattered across the Forest for people wanting less social, more primitive camping conditions, and hunter camping is seasonally available.

In addition, the Forest offers many day-use areas and trails. The NH/AL has eight developed picnic areas. Four nature (interpretive) trails total nearly seven miles and three designated hiking trails total 18.5 miles. Other designated trails on the Forest include 32 miles of mountain bike trail, 70 miles of cross-country ski trail and about 400 snowmobile trail miles. The NH/AL does not have ATV trails. Recreational opportunities may be found on the Forest at large in addition to those provided by its developed facilities. There are abundant small and big game hunting and trapping opportunities. Hundreds of miles of logging roads and non-designated trails are open for

all types of non-motorized uses, like hiking, skiing, horseback riding and mountain biking. Some unimproved roads are open and accessible to licensed motor vehicles, as well.

The NH/AL also offers abundant, quality upland hunting opportunities. Each fall the NH/AL State Forest draws hunters from across the state and the region for gun and archery deer hunting in particular. Ruffed grouse, woodcock and other small game hunting are also popular. Due to the diverse forest types on the property, including aspen, birch, oak and pine forests, the NH/AL provides a variety of game habitat. Just over 50 percent of the NH/AL is high to moderate quality deer habitat, and 45 percent is high to moderate quality ruffed grouse habitat.

Finally, the NH/AL provides “wild land” recreation for those seeking more pristine, quiet “backcountry” experiences in areas with few support facilities, motorized vehicles or signs of management activities. The NH/AL includes a 5,460 acre wilderness area and a total of 27,900 acres of wild areas with limited motor vehicle access. The Forest also has 19 wilderness lakes and 41 wild lakes.

### **Views and Issues of NH/AL User Groups**

Though NH/AL visitors enjoy the Forest in many different ways, they share a love for the area and its beauty. Most people report being generally happy with their visits to the NH/AL. However, focus groups and surveys revealed that individual user groups have some issues and concerns regarding the pursuit of their sport which may affect their views of how the Forest should be managed.

Campers’ primary complaints are excessive noise, crowding and difficulty in getting their desired campsites. While some NH/AL campers prefer backcountry camping, most want either rustic campgrounds or the more modern campgrounds with showers and flush toilets. Those who favor less developed rustic camping claim this type of camping is hard to find. They are strongly opposed to modernizing more of the NH/AL's rustic style campgrounds.

For many snowmobilers, the NH/AL isn’t a destination in and of itself but is part of a larger route. Because of its central location, riders in the Minocqua area must ride through the Forest to go almost anywhere else. Most riders like the NH/AL trails, but some are concerned about hazardous sharp turns.

Many ATV riders want the Forest opened to ATV use; however, they do not agree to the extent of trails desired. Some say they just want "connector trails" across the Forest. Others want a NH/AL-wide trail network like the one that snowmobilers enjoy. Another ATV contingent claims there are enough other places to ride in the region that ATV users should not invite conflict on the Forest by intruding on the large number of non-motorized NH/AL users.

Cross country skiers, hikers and bikers are generally happy with the trail opportunities available in the NH/AL, although members of each group do have some concerns. Some cross-country skiers feel that heavy promotion of snowmobiling is becoming a detriment to their sport. Some also suggest that more ski trails need to be planned and built before the existing trails become overcrowded. Both mountain bikers and hikers have expressed concern about safety on shared narrow, hilly, forested trails.

## **Recreational Opportunities in the Region**

The subsection above focused on recreational opportunities specific to the NH/AL. This section focuses on opportunities available in the region in which the NH/AL is located, as shown in Figure 1 above. Regional recreation can best be described in terms of camping, trail activities, hunting and wild resource lands.

### Camping

The regional camping inventory data shows that the public and private sectors each serve a different niche. Private campgrounds provide nearly all of the fully developed and only a small portion (6 percent) of the modern camping opportunities in the region. The public sector provides the bulk of the modern campsites and all of the rustic and backcountry sites.

### Trails

The different recreation providers in the region generally offer similar types of trails, such as biking, hiking, skiing and snowmobile trails. There are, however, differences in the quantity each provides. To a large degree this can be attributed to the relative differences in the size of each provider's land base and their management priorities.

Regionally, state lands are a minor provider of designated trail opportunities. The national forests, particularly the Chequamegon Unit, and the county forests are important providers of snowmobiling and ATV riding opportunities in the region. Almost all state lands in the region are closed to ATV use. The private sector (which includes clubs, non-profit organizations and commercial operations) provides hiking, ski, snowmobile and ATV trails.

Overall, opportunities for trail-type activities on non-designated forest roads and trails on public land far exceed those on designated trails. Most logging roads and other non-designated trails on state, federal and county lands are open to non-motorized recreational uses. ATVs and snowmobiles are limited to designated trails, except that ATVs may be ridden off-trail on part of the Iron County Forest and on about 800,000 acres of the Chequamegon National Forest.



### Hunting

The NH/AL is a relatively small but important provider of public hunting opportunities in the region. Over one half of the 4 million total forested acres in the region are open to public hunting. Because of its large size, the national forest provides the majority of hunting opportunities, with 52 percent of the region's public hunting land. Seventeen percent of public hunting land is county/municipal forest, 16 percent is industrial forest, 7 percent is NH/AL, 5 percent is private non-industrial forest, and 3 percent is other state land.

High and moderate quality habitat for deer includes aspen, oak, jack pine, birch, and balsam fir forest types, and for ruffed grouse includes aspen, paper birch, and balsam fir. In lands open to public hunting in the region, about 50 percent of the forests are high to moderate quality habitat for deer, and about 35 percent are high to moderate quality habitat for ruffed grouse. The NH/AL encompasses a slightly higher percentage of better quality habitat for deer and ruffed grouse compared to other landowners in the region.

Although the NH/AL provides a relatively small amount of land in the region, general observations suggest that hunting pressure per acre is greater there, due to its high visibility, familiarity, and ready access.

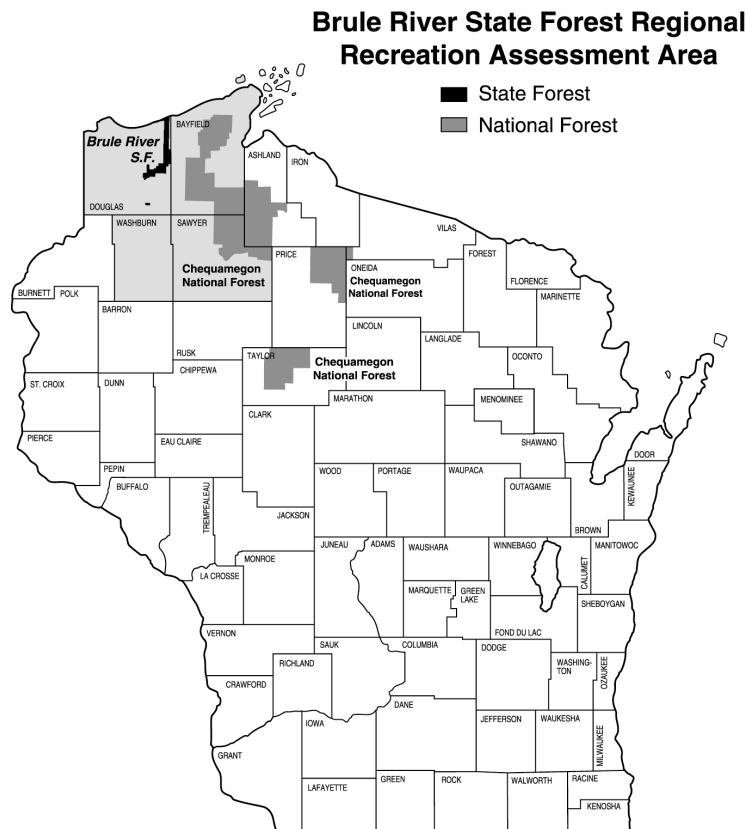
### Wild Resource Recreation

Wild or wilderness recreation emphasizes quiet, solitary experiences with few to no facilities, motors, or signs of management activities. The majority of wild-land recreation opportunities in the region are found on the national forests. The national forests provide over 62,000 acres of designated wilderness and 16 semi-primitive non-motorized areas that total more than 68,000 acres. The remaining lands with some type of wild resource designation are on state properties: the NH/AL State Forest and the adjacent Flambeau Flowage Scenic Waters Area. The Flambeau Flowage wild area contains just over 2,000 acres.

## BRULE RIVER STATE FOREST ASSESSMENT HIGHLIGHTS

For generations the Bois Brule River (the River) has been a special place, drawing people back year after year. People come to fish or hunt, to paddle across its quiet pools and down its rapids, to walk or ski through peaceful woods, to see wildlife, or to camp on the river's banks. This little gem of a river has a reputation that belies its small size. The Brule is world-renowned for its trout fishing. It regularly draws anglers, paddlers and other recreators from across the Midwest. The Brule River, and thus the Brule River State Forest (the Forest) that embraces it, is a popular recreation destination for people from across the state, and especially for people from northwestern Wisconsin and Minnesota's Minneapolis/St. Paul area. The Brule River State Forest and the regional recreation area examined in this report are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2.



## **Recreational Use on the Brule River State Forest**

Visitors to the 40,000 acre Forest take advantage of the beautiful natural setting of Brule River and surrounding landscape. It is estimated that there are 42,000 canoe/kayak visits, 33,000 angler visits, 30,500 hunter visits and nearly 10,000 camper days on the Forest annually. Hunting and hiking are also highly popular activities for Forest visitors. Unquestionably, recreators often engage in several of these activities during a single visit to the Brule. In addition to warm weather visitors, it is estimated that the Forest gets roughly 4,000 cross country skier visits and 19,000 snowmobilers annually. These estimates are based on staff observations, camper registration data, trail pass sales and other sources and should not be viewed as precise.

For paddlers, the Brule River stands out as one of Wisconsin's most scenic and enjoyable rivers. The changing character of the 44 mile Brule River offers a range of canoeing and kayaking opportunities. The upper half is gentle and easy, while the lower half is lively and challenging. Ten canoe landings and a local canoe/kayak rental and shuttle service offer convenience for river visitors. The Brule River's popularity often means crowding at access sites and on the river, which can cause conflicts among canoeists as well as between canoeists and fisherman and shoreline property owners.

The Brule River is one of Wisconsin's most famous and scenic trout streams. Due to its size, a steady flow of cool spring water and its highly productive, self-sustaining fishery, the Brule is considered to be one of the premier trout streams in the lake states. The river and its tributaries support two different high quality fisheries. One features the largest naturally reproducing population of brook, brown and rainbow trout of all the region's Lake Superior tributaries. The other is a Lake Superior-run (migratory) salmonid population (i.e. steelhead, brown trout and coho salmon). More than 80 percent of fishing trips target these lake-run fish, primarily during the spring and fall fish runs. Access to the river is provided at boat launch sites and maintained public parking lots. Other fishing opportunities in the Brule River State Forest are available in several smaller streams and in three small lakes.

The Brule River State Forest offers abundant, quality upland hunting opportunities. Each fall the forest attracts local hunters, and it draws hunters from across the state and beyond as well, particularly for the gun deer and ruffed grouse seasons. Seventy two percent of the Brule's lands have high to moderate quality deer habitat, and 50 percent have high to moderate quality ruffed grouse habitat. The opportunity to hunt deer and grouse and cast for trophy sized trout and salmon on the same day is a special attraction unique to the Brule. Some small game and waterfowl hunters also frequent the Forest. Hunter access is readily available on much of the Forest.

The Brule River State Forest provides recreational facilities for several different types of recreators. The Forest has two small seasonal rustic campgrounds with a total of 40 campsites. Both are used heavily by paddlers and anglers. In winter, the eight mile long After Hours Ski Trail is a highly popular local attraction. ATV riding and snowmobiling occur where longer regional trails cross the Forest. Biking and horseback riding are minor Forest uses. The long, narrow character of the Forest boundary limits “wild land” recreation opportunities on the Brule to one 22 acre wild lake.

### **Views and Issues of Forest Campers and Skiers**

Surveys and a focus group discussion show that Brule River State Forest campers overwhelmingly oppose any move to modernize the campgrounds. They neither expect nor desire modern amenities there. For them, the Forest is a small, natural forest with the river as the focal point. They say rustic camping fits the character of the property and visitors’ activities. Most campers stay in tents – the campgrounds are not easily accessible to larger camper vehicles. The primary problems campers cite relate to noise from other campers. They would like to see more separation between campsites as well as more walk-in sites where they can be away from others and enjoy a more *wilderness-like* camping experience.

Surveys and focus groups show that cross-country skiers enjoy the After Hours Ski Trail. When asked about the natural ski trail attributes they like most, the majority preferred a forested trail with river views and were not at all interested in skiing across wide open areas. They identified three concerns: overcrowding, the need for more trails, and having trails open to skiing with dogs.

### **Recreational Opportunities in the Region**

The subsection above focused on recreational opportunities specific to the Brule River State Forest. This section focuses on opportunities available in the region in which the Forest is located, as depicted in Figure 2.

#### Canoeing and Kayaking

The St. Croix and the Namekagon are the two canoeing rivers nearest to the Brule River and are most often compared to it. These three rivers are, by far, the most popular canoeing rivers in the region. All offer outstanding natural scenery and, except for the more challenging lower Brule, are suitable for paddlers of all skill levels. Each river possesses a different character created by its size, flow and surrounding vegetation and landforms. The White and Chippewa Rivers also offer canoeing opportunities.

However, they are much less popular due to factors such as difficult access, frequent low water, poor water quality and in-stream hazards. For canoeists and kayakers, the Brule River stands out as one of Wisconsin’s most scenic and enjoyable rivers.

### Fishing

A number of streams in the region support runs of Lake Superior trout and salmon. However, none compare to the Brule's size, flow stability, numbers of fish and ready public access. Further, only a few also have a notable resident trout fishery, and none have a resident trout fishery comparable to the Brule. Clearly, the Brule River is the premier trout fishery in the region, attracting anglers from across the state and beyond.

### Hunting

The Brule region has approximately 2.9 million acres of forest habitat and of that, about 1.9 million acres are open for public hunting. The national and county forests provide the bulk of the region's high to moderate quality deer and grouse hunting habitat. The industrial forests rank a distant third. The Brule River State Forest, being comparatively small in acreage, provides two percent of the region's deer and grouse habitat. Data on the relative level of hunting pressure for each of the various landowner categories is not available. However, general observations suggest that hunting pressure per acre on the Forest is greater than on many other lands due to the Brule's high visibility, wide reputation and abundant good quality habitat.

### Camping

Campsites are provided by a mix of landowners across the region, each with a different focus. The national forest is a major provider of rustic camping. County forests provide a mix of rustic and modern campsites. Most backcountry sites are found in the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway and other state properties. Fully developed camping is almost entirely the realm of the private sector. The Brule River State Forest is a minor provider of camping opportunities, having less than four percent of the rustic campsites in the region.

### Trail and Off-Trail Opportunities

Trail opportunities are provided by nearly all sectors, with the Chequamegon National Forest being a major provider. The private sector, primarily through clubs and non-profit groups, is a significant partner in providing trails through land use agreements with private and public landowners. The counties and the national forest support the bulk of public motorized recreation opportunities in the region.

ATVs and snowmobiles are allowed on the Brule River State Forest on trails that are part of larger regional corridor trails. Most logging roads and other non-designated trails on state, federal and county lands are open to non-motorized recreational uses. ATVs and snowmobiles are limited to designated trails, except that ATVs may be ridden off-trail on about 800,000 acres of the Chequamegon National Forest.

### Wild Resource Recreation

Wild resource recreation opportunities in the region are centered in the Chequamegon National Forest, which provides 52,000 acres of semi primitive non-motorized areas and two wilderness areas totaling almost 11,000 acres. Brule River State Forest provides only one wild 22-acre lake.

While important locally, on a regional scale the Brule River State Forest is not a major provider of developed recreation (e.g. camping and trails). Clearly, the Brule River State Forest's unique recreational niche is most defined by the river—which provides unparalleled canoeing, kayaking and fishing opportunities in the region. There likely is no other river in the region, state, or Midwest that can offer a comparable recreational setting or experience.